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Timor-Leste: 20 Years of Freedom

by Monika Schlicher and Maria Tschanz

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Together with international guests, East Timorese celebrated in 2019 the 20th anniversary of the referendum for independence and the multinational mission of the International Force East Timor (INTERFET). They praised Timor-Leste's path to peace, stability and democracy. Monika Schlicher and Maria Tschanz gathered some reflective voices in Timor-Leste.

On August 30th, 1999, 78.5% of the population in Timor-Leste voted in favour of the separation from Indonesia. The East-Timorese had paid a high price for their independence. Nearly 200,000 people lost their lives during the resistance against the Indonesian occupation between 1975 and 1999. The militias' rampage, supported by the Indonesian military after the UN had carried out the referendum, shocked the world. Approximately 1,500 people were killed, more than 270,000 were driven away forcibly to neighbouring West-Timor. "More than 80% of

the infrastructure was destroyed and left in ruins. An international force led by Australia (INTERFET) intervened to restore security." Mica Baretto Soares recalls.

In many ways, Southeast Asia's youngest nation has since made positive changes, and achieved more than a moderate progress regarding several key issues: It has laid the foundations for key state institutions, enabled an environment for freedom of expression, developed a roadmap for national development, and built a basic service system.



From ashes to national reconciliation, reconstruction and development 1999 – 2019 (Photo: Monika Schlicher)

Successes in Democracy and Peace Consolidation

Timor-Leste today is not seen as a fragile country in crisis anymore, as was the case ten years ago. In 2018, Timor-Leste was even ranked as the most democratic country in Southeast Asia in the *Democracy Index* by the *Economist Intelligence Unit*. The country's considerable success in the fields of democracy and consolidating peace is remarkable. And it remains without a question that there is still a lot of work to be done towards the consolidation of its democratic development: President Guterres continues to reject the admission of eleven ministers and vice-ministers into the cabinet due to allegations of corruption. Talks between the president and prime minister have not led to any agreement yet.

The black triangle on Timor-Leste's national flag symbolizes all the "bad and dark", that the country will have to deal with and finish off. "Among these dark sides are the growing corruption and nepotism, which Timor-Leste has to fight vehemently these days," João Boavida, director of CEPAD, the *Centre of Studies for Peace and Development*, notes in a joint panel discussion with the Catholic Church, held in Dili.

The VIII Constitutional Government has shown itself to be weak since it took office in June of 2018. Even now, a third of East-Timor's population lives below the poverty line. In this regard, there have been improvements – ten years ago, the poverty line still concerned half of the population. Moreover, a lot of young people are unemployed and looking for perspectives. The challenges include the reduction of the depen-

dency on oil and gas revenues, promotion of economic diversity and counteraction against the unequal social development.

The Power of Self-Determination

The formerly negative assessment continuously held the East-Timorese people in a feeling of indigence. This has changed significantly nowadays: the people look back at the development of their country with great pride, for which they have assumed responsibility more and more. Their constant and successful struggle for self-determination resulted in power and self-reliance. This could be seen, for instance, in signing a new agreement on the maritime border with Australia along the meridian line.

"Independence is reason enough to be proud" states Maria José Guterres, director of the women's rights organisation *Fokupers*. "The government has achieved quite a number of things in many areas and we can really be content about it all." However, she does not want to suggest that everything has been achieved already. Rather, this reflects the transformed attitude towards the development that we often heard: The focus is no longer on the awareness of lack, but rather on the process being seen and appreciated.

"In the health and education sector, a lot of things have changed, compared to the situation 20 years ago," Guterres continues. "We have clinics these days, universities, schools and day nurseries for children. Everyone has access to public schools, girls and boys alike. Malaria has been stopped from spreading. The infrastructure has improved, remote areas are also a little easier to reach. Slowly, the judicial system's workings have taken a turn for the better. We have signed the Human Rights Convention. Children's rights, women's rights and many more are guaranteed in the constitution, as well as the right to equality. Those are amazing developments and achievements. The inner security of the country has been stabilized, and we can see signs of economic growth."

From a Period of Resistance towards Development Processes

Resistance in Timor-Leste was a broad movement. After the invasion by the Indonesian mili-



tary in 1975, a few remained as armed guerilla's fighting in the mountains. Many civilians who had surrendered to the Indonesians due to widespread starvation and illnesses, continued their resistance, working in the clandestine movement for liberation. Students found their identity in fighting for their land (*"mate ka moris ukun rasik aan"* = translated from Tetun: "Dead or alive – Self-determination"), to the point of being willing to give up their lives for this goal, for instance at the Santa Cruz Massacre in 1991. Young people played a significant role in the resistance, and today there is a large monument honoring the contribution of the youth to the struggle for independence in front of *Motael* church in the heart of the capital Dili.

“There are also protests directed towards the government.”

„Many of the young activists and resistance leaders now engage themselves in NGO work contributing in the community development process in building the nation from the grass roots up. Others have joined the government or became active in political parties, others being a watch-dog to policies and decisions of the government in different areas. Journalists keep an

eye on the government as well. There are also protests directed towards the government,” summarizes Rui Muakandala, Society of Jesus, the director of *Casa Produsaun Audiovisual* (CPA) which is an NGO that has been promoting unity, identity and peace in Timor-Leste through media relations for 16 years. “On many levels, NGOs that are involved in community development, complement government's social, educational, health, youth and cultural projects. But that's just one aspect. Largely, NGOs are committed to marginalized groups and active in empowerment and advocacy work for women and girls. The spirit that united the young activists in the past was the yearning for independence. Now they are united by their desire to develop Timor-Leste towards the common good in a constructive way.”

The Young Generation Claims its Role

Timor-Leste is not only a young nation, the country also has a very young population: 53% of the East-Timorese are below the age of 17 years. Meanwhile a new generation has come of age who only know the struggle for independence from their parents' stories. Just a few

East Timor's merited women: Mana Lu & Mana Kasian (Photo: Monika Schlicher)



Timor-Leste has won the dispute with Australia over the sea border: A victory for the whole nation (Photo: Monika Schlicher)

years ago, many young people were seeking their identity and role in a society dominated by the heroes and fighters of the past, leaving the youth to wonder where their place in society was? Today, they actively claim their place, with a newly found self-confidence.

„I am a child of Timor. My identity as a Timorese is defined by my contribution to the nation. Timor-Leste also belongs to me: This means that I am jointly responsible for this country and its development. I identify with my culture, our crafts and traditions. These are the external conditions. But for me personally the identification with Timor-Leste is that it is MY country. I have to feel this MY, and therefore I am responsible for myself in this country and for the country itself“, explains Maria Filomena Soares Abrantes, 21 years old and member of the youth parliament.

“The last 20 years were like a search for us young people, in order to find ourselves,” adds Oktavianti Maria Nunes, aged 23. “It is important to us to learn about what really happened in our country’s past. In this way we can assess what has been achieved so far. And only through this understanding can we make our contribution to development.”

Dealing with the Burdened Past: Reconciliation and Peace

Their questions about history led young people to participate in many events surrounding the 20th anniversary. These revolved around justice, reconciliation and peace. Respect for and

acknowledgement of the contributions to the international solidarity movement were not only given to us activists by old companions, but also by the young generation. The latter used these events thoroughly to enter into the dialogue. And rather critically at that.

One of these controversial topics is the issue of dealing with the burdened past. While some international activists see it as a fault that Timor-Leste did not insist on the criminal prosecution of the Indonesian generals, young people brought in another perspective. “I admire

the political leadership for beginning the reconciliation process with Indonesia directly in 1999,” points out Matheus dos Santos, who is active in the National Youth Council. “The act of reconciling between Indonesia and Timor-Leste was a way to end the conflict and achieve peace in Timor-Leste for the next generations. Thus, Xanana Gusmão, José Ramos-Horta and others made sure that our country would survive. The country could therefore be rebuilt. We, the young generation, can now use the opportunities that come up to develop our country further and enjoy this independence.”

Lacking Justice – Lacking National Unity

Even in other contexts, a certain pride in the reconciliation process between Timor-Leste and Indonesia has become apparent. Especially on the occasion of the 20th anniversary celebrations, many people once again became aware of how important this was for Timor-Leste. Nevertheless, a ‚but‘ was added: Many of the perpetrators of that time have not yet been brought to justice in Timor-Leste and many victims have not yet been considered. The process may have begun, but it was abandoned half-way. This imbalance still remains.

It has been stressed repeatedly that the nation’s unity continues to be inhibited by the lack of communication between the supporters of the independence and pro-autonomy force. This is still an unprocessed issue. “In the process of building a nation, the space for identification



must open up from ‚Me and my group‘ to an inclusive ‚We‘, in order to break the vicious circle of always making somebody else responsible,” urges Hugo Fernandes, director of the *Centro Nacional Chega!* (CNC), the follow-up institution of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation.

Solidarity with the Victims

This also concerns the issues of solidarity with the victims and survivors. “Up until the establishing of the CNC in 2017, the government policy did not mention the victims of human rights violations at all. Consideration was only given to the veterans,” he continues. “Solidarity with the victims is one of our tasks at the CNC, and there is still a long way to go for us. What is the point of uncovering the truth if we don’t react to it then?” He also refers to the imbalance in the historical narrative which has continued to exist for 20 years: “While the veterans were hailed as heroes, the woman who was raped, who has three children from three different Indonesian soldiers, is still marginalized.”

Adelia Guterres heads the National Directorate for Community Conflict Prevention at the Ministry of Interior. She works on the implementation of the National Action Plan on the UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. At the sidelines of the international conference *Strengthening Solidarity for Justice and Peace* we sat down for a talk with her at the Borja da Costa Memorial Park. The former resistance fighter and activist has never lost her connection to the base. In this spirit, she is now committed to work with the government, always for the good of all, particularly for those in need of assistance.

Her vision of the future is that women who became victims of human rights violations, could finally be given justice. To her, this means, for instance, the women whose men were fighting in the jungle and who were captured by the Indonesian military because of that, then jailed, tortured and raped. It was not uncommon that they were forced to marry their abusers. “In the past, they became victims of human rights violations, after independence, they became victims again. They went through condemnations and violations by the behavior of the government, society, their family and community.

Timor-Leste presents its culture at the official celebration of the 20th anniversary of the referendum for independence (Photo: Monika Schlicher)



Strengthening International Solidarity for Justice and Peace – Beyond the Borders of Timor-Leste (Photo: Maria Tschanz)

People just won't understand that they were forced into marriage, possibly even to save their father's, husband's, their family's lives. It was not their own choice at all to marry this Indonesian soldier. It's the same when women were raped. Today they are accused of having wanted it that way themselves. They are insulted as whores and are ostracized."

This is also why many of the women never publicly bore testimony of these crimes, for example at the Truth Commission's hearings. Only recently do they dare to make these accusations in public. "This is such an important step, which will enable the society to comprehend these offences as criminal. These women have contributed enormously to liberation. It would be a healing process for them to receive this understanding in return. At the time of occupation, it was our dream to be free. We have achieved that. Social equality is my dream for the future."

Reconstructing an entire country is a difficult task, no matter its size or its resources. Twenty years are not a long period of time. "But is it enough time to put people at the centre of development," Mica Baretto Soares sums up the mission.

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Translated into English by Katharina Valjak

About the Authors

Monika Schlicher is director of the Stiftung Asienhaus and also in charge of the Focus Timor-Leste Programme. Since the end of the 1980s, the political scientist, historian and human rights activist has in a spirit of solidarity supported the people of Timor-Leste. She is engaged in public relations and lobbying in a lively exchange with East Timorese from the resistance, civil society organisations and politics.

Maria Tschanz worked from 2003-2007 with AGEH in the Civil Peace Service Programme in Timor-Leste. She was employed by the women's organisation Fokupers for psychosocial counselling, coaching and organisational development. Since then she has been committed to the country and its people.

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V.i.S.d.P.:

Monika Schlicher
Stiftung Asienhaus
Hohenzollernring 52
50672 Köln (Germany)
Tel.: +49-221-716121-11
asienhaus@asienhaus.de
www.asienhaus.de

Gesamtausstattung:

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